

It all began the day she realized he wasn't a hallucination.

She had been getting ready for her first day of high school when it happened. Getting ready, of course, meant kneeling in front of the toilet and heaving every other minute and a half. She spent a lot of time in the bathroom when she was anxious, which was every day, typically between the early morning hours of two and five. Normally, she could muscle her way through, but that day had been exceptionally bad.

Probably because it was the first day of high school, but that was just a wild guess.

She remembered the moment of her epiphany very well. She remembered the shirt she was wearing—an old, Hello Kitty tee with a hole under the left arm and seven different coffee stains—and the way her dark brown waves were falling out of her messy bun. Again.

Most of all, she remembered how frightened she had been when she heard his shuffling footsteps. She had wiped her eyes and blown her nose, leaning against the tub with a congested sigh.

“What do you want?” It was all she could do to keep from crying; to keep the fear from her voice so he wouldn't hear.

She saw the doorknob turn, and after a short pause, the door creaked inward slightly. He poked his head in—too low for him to have been standing, she noticed—and looked at her with wide, glassy brown eyes.

She stared him down, her fear ebbing away to make room for anger. She slammed her open palm against the splitting linoleum. “Answer me!”

He stared at the floor, chewing on his lips, fingers creeping out to wrap around the door. “You never let me get this close,” he whispered.

Well, that was true. He may have followed her everywhere, lingering in the background of her life for as long as she could remember, but she had never let him anywhere near her. Even as a child, she had known he was bad news. Her skin crawled every time he tried to approach her. Seeing him lurk in the shadows of her bedroom made her cry. The very thought of him set her heart racing, and not in the cheesy, chick-flick way she had always been told a heart should race.

Her mother said he was a spirit of fear, but the older she got, the more she believed she was just crazy.

“*What do you want?*” She repeated her earlier question, torn between arguing with him, or ignoring him and spending another twenty minutes suffering alone.

“I just...” He crept a little closer, crouching inside the door. “You’ve been in here a long time.” He stared for a moment and then shuddered. “Everyone is going to hate you today. You have to look and feel your best, and if you’re sick—”

“You think I don’t know that?” She scoffed, shaking her head. “You just love making things worse, don’t you?”

“N-no!” He started to crawl closer but flinched back when she glared at him. “No, I only... I just wanted to tell you I—I’m scared, too.” He took a shuddering breath. “I’m so scared.”

Looking back, it shouldn’t have surprised her. After all, how else would he know exactly what thoughts to put in her head to make her panic? How would he know what thoughts would keep her up at night? How would he know what feelings would keep her from going out, trying new things, and standing up for herself?

Unless he was scared, too. Unless he knew exactly how she felt.

So, she stuck out her hand, a rainbow of hairbands decorating her wrist.

“My name’s Adelaide. Call me Addie.”

“Riley.” He smiled at her, revealing a small gap between his two front teeth. “It’s nice to finally talk to you, Addie. I would have tried sooner, but…”

“You were afraid?”

“Yeah.”

Things changed after that.

Suddenly, Addie wasn’t the jumpiest person in the room. No matter where she went, no matter who she saw, no matter what she did, there was always someone more afraid than her: Riley.

And Riley, well… he was just so pitiful. He jumped at everything, spent most of his time looking over his shoulder, spontaneously cried for no perceivable reason, and easily lost himself to a tempest of irrationally drastic, earth-shattering thoughts on a regular basis.

Addie had to take care of him.

Slowly, it became easier to go places, see people, *do* things. Instead of micromanaging her appearance and body language, she spent her time watching Riley. She made sure there was always enough room behind her for Riley to hide. She reminded him—when the situation permitted—that no one could see or hear him except her, and as such, he didn’t need to be so nervous about what he said and did.

Unfortunately—or, perhaps fortunately, depending on how one looked at it—Riley was hard to convince. If she wanted him to believe her, she had to show him the proof. She couldn’t just tell him test-taking wasn’t the most mortifying thing in the world—she had to take the test, be okay with whatever grade she got, and be a little more relaxed each time she tried.

By the time she graduated, she was at the top of her class.

It wasn't long after that that she ran away from home. It wasn't really running away, she supposed—she was an adult, after all—but still, she packed her bags and left everything behind. Her mother, the drugs, the pictures of a father she never knew, the mildew in the crappy apartment, and eighteen years of mostly bad memories. Everything.

She spent the majority of the day shaking, panting, and trying not to vomit, but she somehow got her bags into the decrepit '95 Dodge Neon and drove away. She didn't know where she was going, though she liked the idea of warmer weather, but she was going.

She and Riley talked the whole way.

For the first hour, it was mostly Addie calming Riley down—explaining to him why they weren't going to die, how they could survive being homeless, and that they could always go back home if it didn't pan out. She assured him that they wouldn't get mugged or kidnapped—probably—and that, as a general rule, people didn't sit around waiting for someone to harass.

By hour two, Riley seemed calmer, and Addie was feeling much more at ease herself. Talking through all the ways things would be okay was soothing for both of them.

So, they continued on their journey. They drove and drove, singing all their favorite songs, making stops along the way just to stare at the scenery, getting gas station slushies and candy bars. It was nice. She felt freer. Lighter. Hopeful.

It had been a long time since she felt hopeful.

They talked about the four years of school they went through together. Riley assured her it was okay she had never been invited to a party because parties were a landmine of bad scenarios. He teased her about saving her life by frantically talking her out of a joyride with some kids from her homeroom class. He bragged, quite pleased with himself, about keeping her out of trouble with drugs and alcohol.

“Nothing is more terrifying than a lack of control,” he always said. “You have to be alert all the time, or things will go downhill fast.”

They spent so much time talking about the past, they forgot to figure out the future. They got almost all the way to the east coast before they realized they had to stop at some point, and they settled down in Georgia.

Upon arrival, Riley had quickly spiraled into a panic attack, convinced they had made a huge mistake. He kept asking to go back, struggling to catch his breath, clutching his chest, telling her how he didn’t want to starve or live on the streets.

Addie responded by walking into the nearest gas station and candidly stating to the cashier, “I have no idea where I am or what I’m doing. I need to find the closest community college, an apartment, and a job. Can you help me?”

Riley had panicked in the corner while Addie spoke with the cashier, mumbling to himself about showing weakness and how she wasn’t supposed to admit she didn’t know what she was doing. People would take advantage of her!

They would *hurt* her.

Riley was thinking all the things Addie already told herself on a daily basis. But Addie kept on talking, getting several helpful tips from the cashier before buying a Coke and saying goodbye.

She sighed a bit as they walked back out to the car, shaking her head in Riley’s direction. “Normally, I would totally agree with you, but *someone* has to take care of us. You gotta trust me, Riley. It’ll all work out.”

She had gone from location to location, explaining her lack of knowledge each time and, for the most part, receiving a warm welcome from helpful strangers. It wasn't long before she was working a part-time job, renting a room in an elderly couples' house, and going to college.

Riley panicked about debts, so Addie very carefully drew up her budget. If she was tempted to splurge, Riley was quick to give her ten thousand reasons why it was a terrible idea, and she stayed well within her means.

She surprised both of them when she went to medical school, but they agreed it made sense, in a way. She had spent eight years comforting and caring for Riley, so her bedside manner was unrivaled, and nothing made her braver than taking care of someone who was more afraid than she was. She decided to be a pediatrician.

She started going to the local church, and while she had her reservations, Riley was enraptured with the idea of God watching over them. Someone who would always come through, who planned everything from beginning to end, who promised things would always work for the good of those who loved him—forget the afterlife, Riley was in heaven just from the comfort his faith brought him.

Initially, she played along, but her faith slowly grew and changed until she was living it for herself. She started involving herself in some of the church's ministries, but she still laughed when the pastor suggested she consider a mission's trip to Romania. She laughed harder when Riley said it was a good idea to learn Romanian, just in case she changed her mind.

*“If you change your mind, and if it's a last minute decision, and if you don't prepare, you'll be lost in a foreign country without knowing even a little bit of the language,”* he said. *“Is there a more terrifying situation?”*

But it didn't matter, because she wasn't going.

She opened a small practice and began seeing patients in the area. She made good money and managed to pay off her student loans. She didn't know why, but she made no move to buy a house. She stayed in her apartment, and she may or may not have begun to study Romanian in her free time.

Her practice was incredibly successful. She was a good listener, good at calming children, and Riley's constant, fearful ramblings made her think outside the box.

"What if he has leukemia? What if he dies?" Riley would say.

"I'll look into it," Addie would reply.

Most of the time, the caution was unnecessary, but there were also times when she caught dangerous and potentially fatal illnesses or injuries. It was worth it, in her mind, and she never tried to stop Riley from his rambling.

Riley helped with the psychological aspect of her patients as well. He had once stopped her in the middle of seeing a thirteen-year-old girl for a persistent stomach ache, fatigue, and chronic aches and pains to tell her she was on the wrong track.

"Someone is or was sexually abusing her."

Addie frowned slightly. "I know her symptoms can be the result of sexual trauma, but they're pretty vague. They could be from a lot of things."

Riley shook his head emphatically. "No, no, no. Please, trust me, Addie. I know fear—I know fear better than anyone, and she's having the life choked out of her. Fear, guilt, shame—you have to trust me."

Addie couldn't disagree with the assertion that Riley knew fear better than anyone else, and she took the necessary steps to reach out to the girl. Riley helped uncover two hundred and twenty-six cases of abuse in the first ten years her practice was open.

She was presented with the idea of going to Romania once again when the church team—the one that went annually, the one that invited her to meetings despite her flagrant disinterest—said they were opening a clinic there. One of the girls already on the team had just finished her schooling to become a registered nurse, and they were praying for a doctor.

Addie refused. She absolutely refused.

“Oh, good,” Riley rambled. “I didn’t want to say anything, but it really is a terrible idea to go. You could get sick, you could die on the flight over there, or you could get caught up in a war of some sort. You won’t know the language, or the people, or the culture, or the stores—what if you need something in an emergency and there’s nowhere to buy it?”

There was no end to his list of reasons, and if it weren’t for the genuine fear in his eyes, Addie might have suspected him of using reverse psychology on her.

Intended or not, it worked.

She went to Romania, and she fell in love. Kids, many of them orphans, relied on her, and she was crazy about each and every one of them. She knew all the kids in the village by name, and even though she was a pediatrician, she wound up treating just as many adults as kids. She delivered a baby or two when the situation required it, and when she wasn’t in the clinic, she was teaching the kids to read and write. She played soccer—no, wait, football—with them, and they would teach her how to dance to their music.

She loved it.

On her fiftieth birthday, she decided it was time to return to America. She missed her church family and her patients, and hitting the half-century milestone made her sentimental. She wanted to go back to her roots, maybe try to find her mom, and see how things had changed since she



left. She suspected it wouldn't take too long, and when she was done, she wanted to spread the word of their work in Romania.

How she was going to do that, she didn't know, because speaking in public absolutely terrified her. But before she could even conquer that fear, she had to address Riley's constant insistence that leaving Romania was a bad idea.

"What if something happens while you're gone? What if there's an emergency and they need you? What if something happens and you can't get back here? What if the plane crashes? What will the kids think if you leave?"

Addie had gotten quite used to calming his fears throughout her life, so it was second nature to assure him. She returned to America without any further delay.

She was gone for less than two weeks when she got word of the war. She tried to go back, but they wouldn't let her, and it wasn't long before the rest of the team came home. They had to wait for things to cool off before they would be allowed back into the country.

Riley had the decency not to say, 'I told you so.'

Addie turned her attention to her past. She tried to find her mom, but as far as Addie could tell, she had fallen off the face of the earth. Addie showed Riley that public speaking wasn't nearly as terrifying as he said by standing up at her high school reunion and talking about her work overseas.

She saw her financial security slowly fading, and the abject fear of being without means to support herself pushed her to reopen her clinic. She talked about her work in Romania with her stateside patients and put informative magazines and brochures in the waiting room. Even if it was just a little, it felt like she was doing something, and it helped ease the ache of being away from Romania.

That ache returned tenfold when she received news that the clinic had been demolished. Over two hundred children in the area had been killed in the three-year conflict, and the horrific realization pulled her down into a deep depression.

Riley would sit beside her bed and ramble about all the things they should have been doing—*needed* to be doing. They needed to be doing everything they could to get help over to Romania, and they needed to do more than the bare minimum at the office. They couldn't close the practice no matter how tired she was, because that would mean patients dying and suffering because of her.

Addie was sickened by the thought. But her body refused to cooperate, keeping her pressed between the sheets for six months.

Medication helped her to get through the episode, and by the time she was back on her feet, she was fifty-four and looking for something new. She considered going back to Romania, but by that time, a new doctor had already been sent over. She told herself that was why she stayed in America.

The real reason was that she didn't want to go back and see just how many of her patients had been killed in the war. It was bad enough that Riley reminded her of the damage she had caused on a regular basis—until she stopped him, anyway.

“Riley, enough.” Addie slammed her hand down on the table, making her coffee cup bounce. “I know, okay? I know I messed up. I should have been there. I know. You don't have to keep reminding me.”

“But it's—” Riley struggled with his words for a moment, more upset than angry at the confrontation. “We can't make it right! It's not a fixable mistake, and we just... we just...” He lost his words again, hands balling into fists.

“I know I can’t make it right, but I can’t keep kicking myself over it, either. I…” Addie sighed and rubbed her forehead, a few strands of slightly grayed hair falling over her eyes. “I have been trying so hard to forgive myself, and you are not helping. I don’t ask you to be quiet all that often, but… just *stop*, Riley. For both our sakes.”

To his credit, Riley did what she asked. There were times she could practically see the words dancing in his eyes, but he never let them get past his lips. He actually seemed to feel a bit better about the whole thing, and as Addie took steps to forgive herself, Riley stopped getting the urge to bring up the past.

Addie was still trying to figure out what she wanted to do with the rest of her life when she got the news.

Stage four breast cancer.

She hadn’t seen Riley so utterly frantic since the flight to Romania—no, since high school. Prom, to be specific.

“Chemo isn’t going to work, Addie! They aren’t going to be able to operate and, and, and all those things you thought about doing are never gonna get done. You never found your mom again! You never traveled around to talk about your work in Romania! You never got married, you never had kids, you’re a *virgin* for goodness’ sake! What about the practice? What about your patients?”

She tried to tell him to take a deep breath and look at the big picture. She tried to tell him to give treatment options a chance and take things one day at a time. She tried to remind him of everything she *had* done with her life.

Riley wasn’t having it, and as his fear escalated, so did hers.

She started having panic attacks—not the ones she was used to, but the ones that had no trigger and gave no warning—and she was afraid to leave home. She drove to her appointments and back, and that was it.

Her funds started running low, and she dipped into her retirement.

“It’s not like you’re going to need it,” Riley would mutter.

She agreed with him. She kept trying different treatment plans, chemotherapy, surgery—nothing worked. She started going downhill fast, and she retreated to her home to fade away on her own terms.

She was visited by her church family, old patients, and other members of the community. They brought her meals, most of which went uneaten, and would often stay and chat about this, that, and the other. She appreciated not having to talk about her ordeal every time someone came over.

They were her friends, and they had learned over the years that repeating an emotionally charged story made her incredibly exhausted. There was always the fear something in the story would be rejected or looked down upon.

“I made good friends, you know.” Addie heaved a sigh and sipped her tea, staring out the window at the pouring rain. “I don’t know how, but I made a lot of people care about me.”

For once, Riley didn’t insist she look for ill intentions. He didn’t insist that they only tolerated her, that anything could cause them to drop her and run, that they were only in it for themselves.

He actually smiled, settling down next to her and laying his head on her lap, as he had taken to doing. “Yeah, you did. You helped a lot of people... it’s nice that you’re being paid back.”

“That isn’t why I did it,” she replied, and she could feel her eyelids drooping.

It seemed she was always tired.

“Hey Riley,” she whispered one day, sitting on the couch and watching the birds outside. “I know where I’m going when I die, but... where do you go? You always dodged my questions when I tried to figure out how your physiology works.”

Riley laughed softly and looked up from the book he had been reading. “I’ll stay here. I don’t know for how long. I’ve never really known where I came from or where I’m going... but I’ll stay here for a long time, I can tell you that.”

Addie laughed weakly, looking out the window at the setting sun. “What are you gonna do without me?”

Riley only smiled at her and crawled to her end of the sofa, laying his head on her lap and holding her hand in his. “I’ll find someone new to help. Maybe even someone who’s more afraid than you.”

Addie crinkled her brow, old eyes casting shadows across her vision. “Do you think that’s a good idea?”

Riley returned her confused expression. “Well, I’ve been doing it for centuries... so, yeah, I think so. Why?”

Addie shrugged her shoulders and looked out her window again. For a moment, her mind wandered away, far beyond where Riley could reach, but then it came back around. “I just thought you might find someone *less* afraid. It would be easier for them to adjust to protecting you.”

Riley cracked a smile at her, looking as young as ever, still sporting that slight gap between his two front teeth. “Addie, I don’t cause fear. I take it.” He turned onto his side and nuzzled against her, smiling faintly. “I take half of someone’s fear, and I help them beat it. You were

always more afraid when I was around because I possessed some of your fear, not because I caused the half you already had.”

Addie felt her eyelids lower, and her hand squeezed his ever-so-slightly. “I... feel like I should be surprised, but...”

Riley squeezed back. “It’s okay. It’s almost over, so it’s hard for you to process things. This always happens.” He kissed the back of her hand and smiled up at her again. “Besides, you always knew. Even if you didn’t put it together, you knew.”

Addie opened her mouth, inhaling slowly, barely able to stay awake. “So... why aren’t you afraid anymore?”

“Because you aren’t afraid anymore. You were determined to protect me, but I was the personification of your own fear. Once you see your fears from an outside perspective... you know exactly how to comfort and reassure yourself. You weren’t really telling me that I was going to be okay, or that I was going to make it no matter what, or that I could do anything I put my mind to—you were telling yourself.” Riley kissed the back of her hand again. “You defeated your own fears, Addie. I was just there to get you out of your own head.”

Addie laughed weakly, a rattling sound coming from her chest. “You’re crazy, Riley...” She shook her head, eyes closing completely, lungs deflating. “I don’t understand...”

“It’s okay, Addie. You don’t have to understand. That’s why I’m here.” Riley lifted himself up a bit and placed his head against her chest, closing his eyes and listening to the soft but steady thrum behind her ribcage. “Don’t think about it. It doesn’t matter. It only matters that you made a life for yourself. You followed your dreams, you accomplished nearly impossible goals, and got everything you wanted. You did that. You were very brave.”

Addie gasped softly, slouching in her chair. “Has anyone... ever thanked you?”

Riley laughed—childishly, almost like a giggle—and he wrapped his arms around Addie to hug her for the last time. “Sometimes, but they don’t have to. I just like to see them happy.”

“Thank you, Riley... you were my lifelong best friend...”

“You were my best friend, too. I’ll always remember you, Addie. You’re one of the special ones.”

Addie didn’t respond. She smiled, breathed in through her nose, and then... she faded. Her last breath pushed between her lips, and the life went out of her body, every muscle relaxing as she slumped in the recliner.

Riley sat up and wiped his eyes. He hopped to his feet and leaned over, giving her a quick kiss on the forehead. He unclasped her necklace, reaching up and putting it on himself. If he had the time, he would have grabbed a picture—maybe even a whole album—but he could feel himself being pulled.

Adelaide’s home melted away, bits and pieces falling into darkness as the classy manor gave way to a dark, musty bedroom in the back of a loud, thrumming building. Riley turned in a small circle and quickly found a little boy curled up in the corner, bruised arms wrapped around his knees as he sobbed into his arms.

He looked down at himself before he did anything else, confirming what he already knew, and then he chanced an approach. “Hello, sweetie.”

Addie had taken years to let him within twenty feet of her, but everyone was different.

“Who are you?” the boy whimpered.

He smiled and extended a hand adorned with rainbow hairbands, looking into the frightened, pale green eyes and feeling a twist in his chest as the distance between them closed. *Here we go.*

“I’m here to help you.” He smiled warmly. “Can you tell me your name?”

“Matthew...” the little boy answered, sniffing as he dragged his arm across his eyes.

He smiled a bit more, trying to put on a brave face despite his dread of first contact.

“Matthew, I know you’re scared, but I’m here to help you.” He moved the hand he had extended for a shake, drawing Matthew’s attention back to it.

Matthew looked at the hand for another second or two, and then he slowly reached out. “I don’t know...” He winced at the movement, sore from a beating of some kind. “I don’t even know who you are.” But he shook the hand anyway.

He tensed when their hands touched, a surge of adrenaline coursing through his veins, heart pounding, head throbbing, stomach twisting, throat constricting. He took a moment to collect himself, forced a smile, and settled down on the floor beside Matthew. He looked down at himself—at the faded, Hello Kitty t-shirt with a hole under the left arm and seven different coffee stains—and felt a few tears fall from his lashes.

“My name's Adelaide. Call me Addie.”